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# The “*Jātaka-Avadānas*” of the *Avadānaśataka* An Exploration of Indian Buddhist Narrative Genres

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While the definition of a “*jātaka*” as a story of a past life of the Buddha is fairly widely accepted, finding an equally acceptable definition of “*avadāna*” is somewhat harder. Scholars have talked of *avadānas* as stories of heroic deeds, stories of *arhats*, of anybody except the Buddha, or of karmically significant deeds and their fruits.<sup>2</sup> Some of these definitions deliberately oppose *jātaka* and *avadāna* while others allow the possibility of a story belonging to both genres. It would seem that any understanding of these two generic terms must include an understanding of the relationship between them.

In this article I will use the second and fourth decades of the *Avadānaśataka*, which together contain twenty stories of episodes in the Buddha’s past lives, to explore the definitions of these two genres. Although they are not called so in the text, the stories are *jātakas* (that is to say, stories of the past lives of the Buddha) and they exhibit certain features of that genre familiar from, for example, the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* and *Mahāvastu*, including a frame story in the “present” time of the Buddha, and a first-person identification of the Buddha with a character in the past. However, although the stories are recognisably *jātaka* stories, they are not labelled “*jātaka*”, and other features, such as their preoccupation with karmic fruition and merit-making, mark them out from better-known *jātaka* collections. Their presence in an *avadāna* collection forces us to reflect upon what it might mean to be both a *jātaka* and an *avadāna*.

During the article I will ask which features of the “*jātaka-avadānas*” of the *Avadānaśataka* can be viewed as “*jātaka-like*” and which as “*avadāna-like*”, and what

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<sup>2</sup> For a helpful outline of scholarly etymologies for *avadāna* see Ohnuma 2007: 291, n. 31. On the relationship between *jātaka* and *avadāna* see discussions in Appleton 2010: 3-6, Ohnuma 2007: 40-48, and Strong 1983.

this might tell us about the text and its wider context. By exploring such aspects as chronology, progression, the presence/absence of *buddhas*, the perfections, the role of karma and merit, and the intended audience responses to the stories, I will attempt to nuance our scholarly definitions of the genres in ways that reach beyond the boundaries of this particular text. At the same time I will argue that it is in the very process of questioning and challenging definitions of genre that generic categories become most useful as scholarly tools.

For this article I will be using the second and fourth decades of the Sanskrit *Avadānaśataka* as found in the critical edition of Speyer (1958 [1902-09]) and my own English translations of these two chapters, which are published in the journal *Asian Literature and Translation* (2013 and 2014). All references to the text are to Speyer's edition unless otherwise stated.

### **The *Jātaka* Stories of the *Avadānaśataka***

The *Avadānaśataka* is, as its name implies, a collection of one hundred *avadānas*. It is composed in Sanskrit, and internally divided into ten chapters of ten stories each. As with many early Indian texts, dating the *Avadānaśataka* with any precision is difficult. A reference within the text to a *dināra*, a coin not used before the first century CE, and the traditional dating of the Chinese translation to the third century, led Speyer (1958 [1902-09]: xv) to suggest a date of around 100 CE. However, both of his pieces of evidence have been questioned. We should not use a single reference to a coin as a restriction on the dating of a whole text, which has certain archaic features including formulaic passages suggestive of an oral composition (on which see Collett 2006). More significantly, the Chinese translation has been recently re-dated by Demoto to as late as the sixth century, and this has led her to suggest a date of around the fourth century for the Sanskrit text of the *Avadānaśataka*, partly on the basis of linguistic evidence (2006: 209-12). Demoto also notes (2006: 210) that the Sanskrit text now extant is probably the result of significant revision up to the seventh century under the influence of the Mūlasarvāstivādins. The period of composition of the text could therefore be quite extended.

The ten chapters, or decades, of the *Avadānaśataka* are themed according to the different characters that feature, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The division of the *Avadānaśataka* into decades

<b>Decade</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Theme</b>
first	1-10	predictions to buddhahood
second	11-20	<i>jātakas</i> with <i>buddhas</i> of the past

third	21-30	<i>pratyekabuddhas</i>
fourth	31-40	<i>jātakas</i> with no past <i>buddhas</i>
fifth	41-50	<i>pretas</i>
sixth	51-60	<i>devas</i>
seventh	61-70	Śākyans
eighth	71-80	female <i>arhats</i>
ninth	81-90	male <i>arhats</i>
tenth	91-100	<i>arhats</i> with bad karma, plus Aśokāvadāna

The *Avadānaśataka*'s *jātaka* stories are therefore bundled in amongst a variety of other stories, some of which tell of past deeds and present fruits, and others of which focus on predicting the future benefits of present acts. The unifying focus of the text is on actions and their consequences – usually but not exclusively good – as they follow a character into a later lifetime.<sup>3</sup> This generally supports the definition of *avadāna* – at least in this collection – as the story of a karmically significant deed and its fruit.

Although none of the stories of the *Avadānaśataka* is explicitly labelled as a *jātaka*, the stories of the second and fourth decades narrate episodes in the past lives of the Buddha, and so can be called *jātakas*. There is no obvious rationale for their position in the text as a whole, though it may be deliberate that they are included within forty stories about forms of buddhahood. They follow ten stories in which the Buddha predicts various characters to future buddhahood, and they are separated by a chapter about *pratyekabuddhas*. That the two decades of *jātaka* stories are separated from one another serves to highlight the fact that they have rather different preoccupations and structures, and adhere to different conventions. As such, these two decades deserve some attention as separate collections before we explore the key themes that set them apart from each other and that place them in relation to other collections of early Indian Buddhist narrative.

Each of the ten stories in the second decade begins in the “present” time of the Buddha, with a particular situation arising that puzzles the monks. In order to explain, the Buddha tells a story of the time of a past *buddha*, and of some person in the past who performs some act of service towards this *buddha*; this person is then revealed to be none other than the present Buddha. In closing, the Buddha explains

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<sup>3</sup> As John Strong (1979: 228) has argued, there has been a tendency to make too much of the division into stories involving past acts and present fruits, and those involving present acts and future fruits. Given that buddhahood and *pratyekabuddhahood* are both impossible during the narrative present of the Buddha, the placing of such attainments in the future is readily explainable.

the fruiting of deeds and exhorts his monks to pay honour to their teacher. A summary of the first of these stories will help to add some colour to this basic structure.

Story 11 tells of a group of sailors who invite the Buddha and his monks to eat with them, bringing them to their village by boat. After his meal, the Buddha offers a *dharma*-talk and thereby converts all the sailors, who achieve one of the four stages of the path or aspire to various future attainments of awakening. When the monks express wonder at the great honour paid to the Buddha, he replies with a story of the past: In the time of a past *buddha*, there was a caravan leader who ferried the past *buddha* and his retinue across a river and then made a resolve to future buddhahood. The Buddha concludes the story by identifying himself with the caravan leader of the past, and instructing his monks that they should revere and honour the teacher, in other words himself. Each of the other stories in this decade follow a similar pattern, as illustrated in Table 2, which summarises the “present” event, past acts in relation to past *buddha*, and the closing message for the monks.

Table 2. Summaries of the *jātaka* stories in the second decade

Story	Frame	Past act	In this way, monks, you should train:
11. Sailors	Buddha honoured by sailors.	Buddha-to-be = caravan leader, ferried past <i>buddha</i> across river and made resolve to buddhahood.	We will honour the Teacher and live in reliance on him.
12. Post	Buddha honoured by Śakra with sandalwood post and other things.	Buddha-to-be = king, provided for past <i>buddha</i> for rainy season retreat.	as above
13. Bath	Buddha makes Śakra rain for desert-stranded merchants.	Buddha-to-be = king, provided for past <i>buddha</i> for rainy season; during drought king bathed past <i>buddha</i> , causing Śakra to send rain.	as above
14. Plague	Buddha cures epidemic through loving-kindness; brahmins and householders become faithful.	Buddha-to-be = king, provided for past <i>buddha</i> for rainy season; during epidemic the past <i>buddha</i> 's robe is paraded through the city to cure everyone.	as above
15. Miracle	Buddha takes on the form of Śakra and descends into sacrificial arena to convert brahmins.	Buddha-to-be = king, wished to provide for past <i>buddha</i> in his faithless land so had magnificent monastery built; past <i>buddha</i>	as above

		performed miracle and converted everyone.	
16. Five-year(ly) festival	At time when support of Buddha and his monks is forbidden, Śakra and the gods perform a festival to honour him and thereby persuade the king (Ajātaśatru) to retract his decree.	Buddha-to-be = king, provided for past <i>buddha</i> for rainy season and thereby cured an epidemic, then performed the festival.	as above
17. Eulogy	Buddha, with help of Pañcaśikha, outperforms the finest musician in the land, and he becomes an <i>arhat</i> . Musicians entertain Buddha and his monks, Buddha smiles and predicts their pratyekabuddhahood.	Buddha-to-be = king, along with female musicians saw past <i>buddha</i> in fire meditation, became faithful and awoke him from meditation with music; resolved to buddhahood.	as above
18. Boon	Condemned criminal takes refuge in Buddha and is allowed (by King Prasenajit) to ordain; becomes an <i>arhat</i> .	Buddha-to-be = brahmin well-versed in Vedas, offered past <i>buddha</i> his seat and praised him in 100 <i>paḍas</i> ; resolved to buddhahood.	as above
19. Cloth of Kāśī	Buddha and monks greatly honoured by Bimbisāra and the citizens, with food, drink and <i>kāśī</i> cloth.	Buddha-to-be = king, offered past <i>buddha</i> food and a very valuable cloth, then after his <i>parinirvāṇa</i> built a <i>stūpa</i> .	as above
20. Divine food	Wealthy householder, with help of Śakra and other gods, makes grand offering to Buddha and disciples, then resolves to buddhahood; Buddha smiles and predicts such.	Buddha-to-be = king, supported past <i>buddha</i> for rainy season, and made jewelled image of him.	as above

As can be seen from these brief summaries of the second decade stories, these ten *jātakas* share certain key features. Most obviously, the stories take place in the time of a past *buddha*, and concern themselves with the service performed for that *buddha* by the person who will become the Buddha of our time (and whom I will refer to as the Bodhisattva, though he is rarely called such in the text<sup>4</sup>). This act of service then has positive results, both in the past and also in the final life of the Buddha, as he experiences the fruits of his actions. It is worth noting that only three stories (11, 17 and 18) mention an aspiration to buddhahood on the part of the Buddha, and that this is not therefore a necessary part of this decade's stories. Predictions to buddhahood, a key feature of the first decade of the *Avadānaśataka*, are also absent. (We will return to the importance of aspirations and predictions below.)

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<sup>4</sup> The term *bodhisattva* is only used in stories 31, 36, 37 and 38.

In contrast to the second decade, the stories of the fourth decade tell of the Buddha's impressive actions in a past time uninhabited by past *buddhas*. Story 31 begins with the monks being troubled by illness, while the Buddha remains perfectly healthy. When they express wonder at this he tells of how in the past he had been a king who was so determined to cure an epidemic amongst his citizens that he killed himself in order to be reborn as a great curative fish, and then allowed the citizens to eat him alive. The Buddha concludes by teaching that the monks should cultivate compassion towards all beings. The other stories of the fourth decade contain similar events: the surprise of the monks at some peculiar situation or unexpected teaching is met with a story of the Bodhisattva's extraordinary actions in the past. Each story ends with a different moral teaching, but the overall message is that the monks should emulate the Bodhisattva's great qualities. The stories are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Summaries of the *jātaka* stories in the fourth decade

Story	Frame	Past act	In this way, monks, you should train:
31. Padmaka	Monks troubled by illness, but Buddha remains well.	Buddha-to-be = king who jumped off his terrace with a resolve to become a <i>rohita</i> fish in order to cure his citizens; resolved to help them also when he becomes Buddha.	We will cultivate compassion towards all beings.
32. Mouthful	Buddha gives teaching on merits of giving, and monks are impressed by this.	Buddha-to-be = king who shared his storehouses during a famine and even gave his last mouthful of food to a brahmin (=Śakra) so impressing him enough to bring rain.	We will give gifts and make merit.
33. Dharmapāla	Buddha maintains friendly thoughts towards Devadatta despite his murderous attempts.	Buddha-to-be = prince whose mother demanded to drink his blood, yet he maintained friendly thoughts towards his parents and the executioners.	We will cultivate friendly thoughts towards all beings.
34. Śibi	A monk is unable to thread his needle and cries out 'Who desires merit?' Buddha replies that he does.	Buddha-to-be = King Śibi, giver of great gifts; gave blood to insects, eye to vulture and brahmin (=Śakra); Śakra declared he will soon be a Buddha.	We will give gifts and make merit.
35. Surūpa	Buddha's teaching inspires the fourfold assembly to respect	Buddha-to-be = king who willingly sacrificed his son and wife to a <i>yakṣa</i> (=Śakra) in order to hear a verse of	We will revere the <i>dharma</i> .

	towards the <i>dharma</i> .	<i>dharma</i> ; Śakra declared he will soon be a Buddha.	
36. Maitrakanyaka	Buddha teaches proper reverence for one's parents.	Buddha-to-be = merchant's son, went to sea against his mother's wishes, slapping her first; visited heavenly places (for supporting his mother) then a hell with a rotating wheel in his head (for hitting his mother) from which he was freed when he declared he wanted nobody else to have to endure it.	We will honour our mother and father.
37. Hare	Buddha struggles to make a monk separate from his relations and enter the forest, but eventually succeeds, and he becomes an <i>arhat</i> .	Buddha-to-be = hare, devoted to his friend a hermit; persuaded the hermit to stay in the forest despite lack of food by offering himself into the fire as a meal; saved by the hermit, made act of truth persuading Śakra to send rain, then made a resolve to buddhahood.	We will dwell as good friends, not as evil friends.
38. Dharma-seeker	Buddha, along with his monks sweeps the Jeta Grove, while Anāthapiṇḍada is away, and speaks in praise of cleaning. Later persuades the embarrassed Anāthapiṇḍada to come and hear the <i>dharma</i> , because the <i>dharma</i> deserves respect.	Buddha-to-be = prince-become-king who desired the <i>dharma</i> and offered to enter an oven in exchange for a verse of <i>dharma</i> from a <i>yakṣa</i> (=Śakra).	We will revere the <i>dharma</i> .
39. Anāthapiṇḍada	Buddha prevented by a brahmin from crossing a line in the sand until Anāthapiṇḍada discharges a debt on the Buddha's behalf.	Buddha-to-be = prince who gave surety for a friend's gambling debt (friend = Anāthapiṇḍada) but never paid.	One should strive to avoid taking what is not given.
40. Subhadra	Subhadra becomes the last personal disciple of the Buddha and attains <i>parinirvāṇa</i> before him.	[1] Buddha-to-be = leader of herd of deer, who sacrificed himself to ensure the escape of his herd, even returning to save a stray young deer (=Subhadra); resolved that in future he would save them again, from <i>saṃsāra</i> . [2] Subhadra = deity who helped Kāśyapa Buddha's nephew Aśoka return to his uncle's presence in time to receive a	We will dwell as good friends, not as evil friends.



		teaching and attain arhatship, and enter <i>parinirvāṇa</i> before the Buddha; deity resolved to do so too in time of future Buddha.	
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Several contrasts between the two decades are immediately apparent. All the stories of the second decade involve acts of devotion towards *buddhas* of the past, while those in the fourth decade instead have no past *buddhas*, and the Bodhisattva acting more independently. The reasons given for telling the stories also differ between the decades, with the second decade stories all ending with an injunction to honour the Buddha while the fourth decade stories suggest emulation of the Buddha's qualities. These varying features demonstrate that there is a clear rationale for the grouping of the stories and for their division into two separate decades. As such, the *Avadānaśataka* offers us a window into some of the generic conventions of both *jātaka* and *avadāna*.

## Themes and Comparisons

Having outlined the two types of *jātaka* story found in the *Avadānaśataka*, I would now like to explore how they compare with regard to four key themes that are relevant to the definition of the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres as a whole. Firstly, there is the question of the presence or absence of *buddhas* during the past life, and how this relates to notions of chronology or progression. Secondly, and closely related to the first theme, there is the question of whether the Buddha-to-be is demonstrating devotional activities (for example honouring past *buddhas*) or striving independently to acquire the perfections necessary for buddhahood. The third theme is that of karma and merit, and how the acquisition of merit is related to the pursuit of buddhahood. Finally, the fourth theme that I will explore here is the reason given for telling the story, and the implied audience response. Following an exploration of these four themes I will offer some reflections on how the *jātakas* of the *Avadānaśataka* help us to understand the rationale of the *Avadānaśataka* in particular, and of the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres more broadly.

### *The Presence or Absence of Past Buddhas*

In a well-known paper by Frank Reynolds (1997) on the three lineages of the Buddha, he notes that *jātaka* stories (as in, for example, the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*) make up the Buddha's lineage of past lives, while other stories of his encounters with multiple *buddhas* of the past, such as in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, establish his place in the lineage of past *buddhas*. (His third lineage, that of the Śākyas, will not concern us

here.) Building on this distinction in his 2011 article on ‘The Buddha as Ender and Transformer of Lineages’, John Strong argues that there are, broadly speaking, two different types of *jātaka*: those in which we find ‘chronology without progression’ and those exhibiting ‘progression without chronology’ (Strong 2011: 181). That is to say, those *jātakas* in which the Buddha-to-be repeatedly renews his vow at the feet of multiple *buddhas* of the past, such as in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, exhibit chronology, a sense of the passing of time, without any apparent progress in terms of the Bodhisattva’s path. In contrast, in the many *jātakas* in which there are no *buddhas* present we more often find the Buddha-to-be practising the many qualities required for buddhahood, and thus progressing towards that aim. These latter stories, however, rarely demonstrate any sense of chronology.

While I find Strong’s distinction very helpful, not least because it reminds us that there is more than one set of generic conventions for *jātaka* stories, it is worth noting that not all *jātakas* in which there are no *buddhas* show the Bodhisattva making progress. Many of the stories in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, for example, have other concerns and do not give us any sense of progression towards buddhahood. In addition, there are some traditions that assign chronology to *jātakas* of progress, for example the Southeast Asian belief that the final ten stories of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* narrate the final ten lives of the Buddha. In other words, while Strong’s two categories are instructive, to give a complete picture we would also need to include *jātakas* in which there is neither progression nor chronology, as well as those which exhibit both.

How well, in any case, do the *jātakas* of the *Avadānaśataka* fit this distinction? Here we have two decades roughly parallel to the two categories of story identified by Strong and Reynolds. In the second decade the Buddha-to-be interacts with *buddhas* of the past. In the fourth he carries out his own extraordinary acts in a time with no *buddhas*. However, neither decade contains any sense of chronology: the *buddhas* of the past are not in any known order, and nor is there any indication that the past actions are presented chronologically. There is also limited sense of progress, even in the fourth decade, since the actions of the Buddha-to-be are largely used to inspire the monks to emulate his virtues, not to demonstrate his readiness for buddhahood, though arguably this idea is implicit.

One other major difference sets the *Avadānaśataka* stories apart from better-known tales of encounters with past *buddhas*, such as those found in the *Buddhavaṃsa*. In the *Buddhavaṃsa* the Bodhisatta makes an aspiration to buddhahood at the feet of each past *buddha* and receives a prediction that this aspiration will come true. In this way the stories demonstrate that the Buddha is part of a long and model lineage of *buddhas*. However, while aspirations and predictions are very common in the *Avadānaśataka* as a whole, in the second decade

the Buddha-to-be only resolves to buddhahood three times (in stories 11, 17 and 18) and in none of these cases does he receive a prediction to buddhahood from the *buddha* of the time.<sup>5</sup> It is as if the *Avadānaśataka* is deliberately placing the focus on the Buddha's own actions and their fruiting, and glossing over the function of *buddhas* as predictors of future attainments that is so prominent elsewhere in the text. The notions of lineage, chronology, and progress towards buddhahood, as emphasised by Reynolds and Strong, are therefore not prominent in this text.

### *Perfections and Devotions*

If the stories of the *Avadānaśataka* fail to fit either definition of *jātakas*, namely *jātakas* of progress or *jātakas* of chronology, perhaps they should instead be judged according to their identification as *avadānas*. The presence or absence of past *buddhas* in the stories is important in relation to our understanding of this genre too. Several scholars have highlighted the difference between *jātaka* portrayals of gradual perfection, and *avadāna* portrayals of the benefits of devotion. Ohnuma, in her book on gift-of-the-body *jātakas*, summarises the position as '*jātakas* are about "perfections" whereas *avadānas* are about "devotions"' (2007: 41). She argues that the Bodhisattva is forced into extreme acts of sacrifice in order to progress towards buddhahood precisely because there is no Buddhism present at the time. When there is Buddhism present, there is a powerful field of merit and so smaller acts of devotion bring good rewards, and extreme acts of self-sacrifice are no longer necessary. Thus, in this analysis, the presence or absence of *buddhas* during the story is closely linked to the types of action portrayed, and hence crucial to understanding whether it is a *jātaka* or *avadāna*.

As we have already noted, the stories of the second decade of the *Avadānaśataka* are set in a time of past *buddhas*, and they do indeed have a focus on devotion, with the Buddha-to-be providing support and honour for *buddhas* of the past in a variety of rather mundane ways. In response, past *buddhas* three times ensure the end to an epidemic or famine in the Bodhisattva's kingdom (13, 14, 16), and of course the future life benefits include the Buddha receiving honour in his final life. To this extent they fit Ohnuma's model of *avadānas*. As for the fourth decade, at first glance the stories appear to fit Ohnuma's definition of being *jātakas*

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<sup>5</sup> Strong's notion (explored in his 1979 article on gift-giving in the *Avadānaśataka*) of rūpalogical acts (giving) leading to rūpalogical fruits (receiving) and dharmalogical acts (resolving) leading to dharmalogical fruits (buddhahood) thus does not apply to the *jātakas* of the *Avadānaśataka*, though it provides a revealing analysis of other parts of the text.

‘about perfections’. The Bodhisattva carries out a variety of extreme acts, including bodily sacrifice either out of compassion to other beings or in order to gain a verse of the *dharma*. Indeed, five of the stories tell of his willingness to sacrifice his own body (31, 34, 37, 38, 40), while another two show him giving up his last mouthful of food (32) or members of his family (35). Another tells of how he maintained friendliness despite being killed by his parents (33). These stories would all appear to fit Ohnuma’s definition well. However, the remaining two stories tell of the Buddha-to-be’s *bad* actions (36, 39), or his imperfections, suggesting that the real focus here is on karma and its fruits, rather than the acquisition of virtues.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the perfections are mentioned only once in the fourth decade, when a monk reminds the Buddha that he has acquired all six qualities over multiple aeons.<sup>7</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that while the idea that the second decade stories are ‘about devotions’ is reasonable, the idea of the fourth decade as being ‘about perfections’ is not. Neither are the fourth decade stories ‘about devotions’, however, since the absence of a field of merit in the form of past *buddhas* make such an emphasis impossible. Rather, the stories of the fourth decade have an emphasis on karma and karmic fruition, and so it is to this theme that we must now turn our attention.

### *Karma, Merit and Buddhahood*

As noted above, all the stories of the *Avadānaśataka* appear to have a focus on the consequences of deeds in subsequent lifetimes, and how this relates to the achievement of rebirth states (such as in heavenly or *preta* realms) or forms of awakening (buddhahood, pratyekabuddhahood or arhatship). The two decades of *jātaka* stories are no exception, though again we see rather different approaches to karma in each chapter. The second decade is somewhat simpler and more uniform

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<sup>6</sup> In any case I would argue – and have done so in my 2010 book *Theravāda jātika* stories – that the idea that *jātakas* are about perfections is over-emphasised, and is not original to the genre. For example the notion that the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* stories illustrate the perfections is imposed on an existing collection of stories, rather than being part of the rationale for their composition or collection.

<sup>7</sup> In the ‘story of the present’ of 34, discussed below, where they are listed but not explicitly called *pāramitās*. The six *pāramitās* do feature elsewhere in the text, including in the second decade, as part of a long list of the qualities of a *buddha*. In none of the stories do we find any idea that the stories of the Buddha’s past lives illustrate the perfections, however.

in its message: the merit accumulated by the Buddha in his past lives is still fruiting for him even after his buddhahood, and is causing him to receive great honour from men and gods. The fourth decade, on the other hand, is more complicated. It appears to affirm the fruiting of karma for the Buddha, though in this case through a story of bad karma, the story of Anāthapiṇḍada's gambling debt (39). In this tale, the Buddha is prevented from crossing a line that has been drawn in the sand by a brahmin until the layman Anāthapiṇḍada comes and discharges a debt. The Buddha explains that in the past he had been a prince who provided surety for a gambling debt of a friend of his – Anāthapiṇḍada in a past life – and then failed to pay it. This, then, explains the event in the present.

The Anāthapiṇḍada story suggests awareness of the debate surrounding the Buddha's susceptibility to negative karmic fruits – a debate that has been discussed by, amongst others, Jonathan Walters (1990), Sally Cutler Mellick (1997), and John Strong (2012) – since the actions are presented in quite an ambiguous way. When the Buddha is initially stopped by the brahmin, the story says: 'Then the Exalted One, in order to demonstrate the consequences of actions, and in order to abstain from taking what is not given (*karmaṇāmavipraṇāśasaṃdarśanārtham adattādānavairamaṇyārtham*), remained on that spot like a threshold stone' (Appleton 2014: 26; Speyer 1958: 223). The implication is that the Buddha *chose* to be restrained by his past actions, rather than being forced to do so. The text allows for an interpretation in which the Buddha is not subject to his negative karmic fruits.

However, when the Anāthapiṇḍada story is placed in the context of the many others that show the Buddha enjoying the fruits of past actions, such as receiving similar benefits to those he himself conferred on *buddhas* of the past, or being free from illness because he once sacrificed himself to cure others, such a reading seems less likely. In every single story of the second decade, as well as in stories 31 and 39, the Buddha repeats a formulaic passage about the inevitable fruiting of his actions when he introduces the story of the past, reinforcing the message that karmic consequences are inescapable and personal, even for *buddhas*. Logically this extends to bad karma too.

If the Buddha's susceptibility to karmic fruits is widely accepted, the real reason for finding stories of the Buddha's experiences of bad karmic fruits problematic is the implication that the Buddha has committed bad deeds as well as good ones during his long path to buddhahood. This uneven path to buddhahood is clearly accepted by the *Avadānaśataka*, however. While the story of Anāthapiṇḍada is ambiguous about whether or not the Buddha is subject to negative karmic fruits, it is clear that he performed bad deeds in the past. Likewise, the story of Maitrakanyaka (36) relates how the Buddha-to-be once hit his own mother, and suffered in hell as a result. Although no link is made to the Buddha's present

experiences – instead the story is told to explain why the Buddha preaches respect for one’s parents – the story makes no attempt to portray a perfect Bodhisattva.<sup>8</sup> One message of the *Avadānaśataka jātaka*s would appear to be that the Buddha’s long lifestory involved occasional imperfections as well as extremely virtuous and selfless acts.

Tales of the Buddha’s imperfections aside, the fourth decade has much less of a focus on cause and effect than the second decade. Implicitly, perhaps, the actions of the Buddha in his past lives are being used to explain his achievement of buddhahood, but this is nowhere made explicit. Indeed, aspirations to buddhahood do not feature prominently in the fourth decade any more than they do in the second decade, and neither are there any predictions to buddhahood, though twice the god Śakra, after testing the Bodhisattva’s virtue, declares him to be not far off (34, 35). The story of the hare (37) is the only one in the fourth decade in which the Buddha-to-be explicitly aspires to buddhahood, though in two others in addition to this one (31, 40) he aspires to help his companions again in his future time as Buddha. Instead, the majority of the fourth decade stories of the past are introduced by the Buddha as demonstrating how he valued particular virtues (such as generosity, or honouring the *dharma*) even in his past lives. The monks should not, therefore, be surprised that he holds these things dear now that he has gone beyond birth and death and is all-knowing. As such, the past lives demonstrate a continuity of values, rather than a karmic explanation. The focus is therefore less the karmic preparations required for buddhahood, and more the impressive demonstrations of virtue even in past lives that might inspire emulation by the Buddha’s followers.

One other interesting feature of these stories is relevant to a discussion of karma and merit: In several of the stories of the fourth decade the monks’ puzzlement that prompts the telling of the story is caused by the Buddha showing an interest in activities relating to making merit, or giving a sermon on a surprising subject such as the reverence due to one’s parents. The surprise of the monks suggests that they are here representing the view that the Buddha should be

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in this story as found in the Pāli *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, the abusive son is not identified with the Bodhisatta, betraying a stronger unease in the Pāli tradition with the idea of the Buddha’s bad karma. That is not, of course, to say that there are no stories of the Bodhisatta’s morally dubious actions in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* – for examples see Appleton 2010, chapter 2. Stories of the Buddha’s bad karma also appear in the *Apadāna*. However, as Walters 1990 discusses, a strong strand in the Theravāda commentarial tradition tended to deny any karmic cause for the Buddha’s suffering, and there is evidence that the *Apadāna* stories of bad karma came into the tradition from another school of early Buddhism.

beyond such mundane interests, and the story that he tells demonstrates quite the opposite – that the Buddha is still interested in gift-giving and honouring parents, just as he was in the past. For example in story 34 a frustrated monk who is struggling to thread his needle cries out, “Who in the world desires merit (*ko loke puṇyakāma iti*)?” and the Buddha, who happens to be passing, replies that he does. When the monk, somewhat agitated by this response, points out that the Buddha has ‘accumulated generosity, good conduct, forbearance, vigour, meditation and wisdom during three incalculable aeons’, the Buddha replies that he is eager for merit and never satiated with it (Appleton 2014: 8-9; Speyer 1958: 182-3). He then tells the story of his past life as the ever-generous King Śibi. So, although the stories of the fourth decade are not usually told to explain the causes of pleasant effects, as they are in the second decade, they are in some cases told to ensure that monks do not abandon meritorious action in pursuit of their goals. They also bring the magnificent Buddha back down to earth – as a person willing to help a monk thread his needle (34), or happy to sweep his own hermitage (38).

#### *Audience Responses to Jātaka Stories*

The fourth decade’s concern for the Buddha’s companions brings us onto our final theme, namely the question of why the Buddha tells *jātaka* stories to his followers, or why Buddhist authors and compilers preserved and circulated the stories. One very useful feature of the *Avadānaśataka* stories is that, like the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, the stories of the past are all framed in a story of the present, which provides the setting in which the Buddha spoke of his previous lives. In addition, at the end of each story the Buddha sums up the moral with the statement ‘In this way, monks, you should train,’ followed by a short teaching. As a result, we have some evidence as to the purpose of the stories as it was understood by the text’s compilers.

As we have seen, the frame stories of the *Avadānaśataka jātakas* tend to have a fairly standard model, in that something happens that puzzles the monks and this leads the Buddha to tell the story. Often, as in all the stories of the second decade and some of the fourth, the story of the past illustrates the karmic *cause* for the puzzling event in the present. So for example the Buddha’s praise of a past *buddha* leads to his receipt of praise. Perhaps the most interesting story on this model is number 39, the story of Anāthapiṇḍada’s gambling debt discussed above; in this tale the story of the past is told to explain the Buddha’s inability to cross a line in the sand until Anāthapiṇḍada comes and discharges a debt on his behalf. The purpose of the story of the past is not always explanatory, however. Another apparent motivation is to teach a general moral lesson by demonstrating the Buddha’s

attention to virtue even in past lives. This appears to be the main model for the fourth decade.

This distinction is further cemented in the points of training at the end of the stories. The second decade stories all end with the Buddha telling the monks they should revere the teacher, in other words himself. Thus the stories all serve to glorify the Buddha, on account of his long history of devotional interactions with *buddhas* of the past. In the fourth decade, by contrast, there are several different lessons given – to cultivate compassion, give gifts and make merit, be friendly and live in support of one-another, honour one’s parents, avoid taking what is not given, and live in devotion to the *dharma* – yet one thing holds this set of moral lessons together, namely the implication that the audience’s response should be *emulation* of the Buddha’s virtues, rather than simply awe at his achievements. Curiously, the monks are inspired to emulation by the more extreme stories – such as feeding your son to a demon in order to receive a verse of teaching – while the more manageable tasks of supporting the Buddhist community are used to inspire reverence. In a sense, though, emulation is the lesson for all the stories, for even in the second decade the monks are told to honour the Buddha as the Buddha once honoured *buddhas* of the past.

The clear instructions given to the audience about how they should respond to the Buddha’s stories of past lives in the *Avadānaśataka* remind us that *jātaka* stories can tell us as much about the Buddha as teacher as they do about the Bodhisattva as aspirant to buddhahood. In these tales we see the Buddha willing to explain matters that puzzle the monks, keen to emphasise that karmic fruiting is inevitable, even for *buddhas* like himself, and able to draw on a host of remembered experiences in the past in order to inspire virtuous behaviour and warn against bad actions. The selection of stories in this text may therefore have as much to do with their suitability for teaching the Buddha’s followers as with their ability to illustrate the Buddha’s past lives.

## Conclusion

What has this study of the *jātaka* stories contained within the *Avadānaśataka* taught us about the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres? Firstly, we have noted that even within a single text we can find two very different understandings of what a past life story of the Buddha is and does. On the one hand stories of the past can demonstrate the Buddha-to-be interacting with past *buddhas*, supporting them and gaining merit in the process. On the other hand, stories of times without *buddhas* can help to demonstrate the virtues that the Buddha values, and the extent to which he practised them even in his past lives. The presence or absence of *buddhas*



in *jātaka* stories is clearly essential to the understanding of different *jātaka* sub-genres in this text, as it is also elsewhere in Buddhist narrative collections, but it is not always interpreted in the same way as in other texts. As such, the *Avadānaśataka* stories remind us not to assume that the better-known Pāli collections, such as the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* and the *Buddhavaṃsa*, are the standard model for the major Buddhist narrative genres. Rather, we find multiple different generic forms and conventions for *jātaka* and *avadāna* throughout South Asian Buddhist texts.

Secondly, the stories allow some reflection on how karma and merit is perceived as relevant to the Buddha's long path and to his final life. The second decade shows clearly that the Buddha still enjoys the rewards of his past meritorious actions, and a story from the fourth decade suggests that he may also experience the results of bad actions in the past, though this is ambiguous. Stories from the fourth decade also make it clear that the Buddha still cares about merit, about doing good in quite mundane ways, and is keen for his followers to remain grounded. Such a position on karma and merit is part of a much broader Buddhist debate about the nature of buddhahood and the place of merit-making on the path to *nirvāṇa*. These stories therefore allow us to glimpse one particular position in this debate, a position that belongs to the Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda school.

Thirdly, the tales tell us something about how past-life stories of the Buddha were understood to function for the audience. Thus the stories of the second decade prompt reverence for and reliance upon the Buddha, while those of the fourth decade encourage emulation of his great qualities, while simultaneously acknowledging that such emulation will necessarily be weak. Both sets of stories assume a monastic audience for the stories, despite the common scholarly assumption that narratives are a form of popular entertainment for the masses. Such observations are worth keeping in mind when we explore other textual collections. For example, we might ask how these two different models of audience response relate to the assumed function of *jātaka* stories in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, the *Mahāvastu*, or the *Jātakamālā*. The two models remind us once again that there is no single function to a *jātaka* story, but rather multiple rationales for the genre that may be amplified or glossed over in different contexts. The decisions made by textual compilers over how to present the stories and their audience responses therefore reveal what particular communities understood about the nature of the Buddha and the relevance of his past lives to his followers.

In addition to these three areas of insight, a study of these stories sheds light more broadly on the generic conventions of early Indian Buddhist narrative. It is clear that even the *jātaka* genre, which is reasonably unproblematic to define in general terms as a past life story of the Buddha, is internally diverse. Each text develops a distinctive idea (or, as here, more than one idea) of why the Buddha told

stories of his past lives and what sort of stories he told. The flexibility of the genre allows it to be used to explore different aspects of Buddhist teachings and ideals. Texts like the *Avadānaśataka* are part of a wider Indian narrative context, and as such they can speak to an established understanding of generic forms, even without using the generic terms, and even as they play with them in creative ways. As for the *avadāna* genre, the *Avadānaśataka* generally supports an understanding of this genre that places karma and its fruits central stage. However, the extent to which karmic consequences are the focus differs between the two decades under discussion, suggesting that flexibility is a feature of the *avadāna* genre too. Certainly we would also be wise to acknowledge that each text and collection provides its own understanding of the *avadāna* genre, and that the *Avadānaśataka*'s model is just one of many.<sup>9</sup>

If both genres – *jātaka* and *avadāna* – are redefined by each text that contains them, to what extent are the labels useful at all? As I hope I have demonstrated in this article, it is not the labels themselves that are helpful, but the ways in which generic conventions allow different textual compilers to explore key Buddhist ideals. Certain key features are acknowledged as relevant to the generic forms, such as the presence or absence of past *buddhas*, notions of chronology or progress, ideas of lineage, the pursuit of perfections, the demonstration of virtues or even flaws, and explorations of karma and merit. Decisions about which of these to explore and which to push to the background then reveal the motivations or ideological positions of the stories' compilers. And in this way the concerns of narrative genres reveal broader concerns or ideas about buddhahood, the Buddhist path, and the Buddha's community.

These stories have real depth to them, and deserve considerably more attention than they have so far received. I hope that my own exploration of how they relate to both the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres will prompt other scholars to work on these tales, and on the other fascinating stories of the *Avadānaśataka*.

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<sup>9</sup> The biggest challenge to those trying to come up with an overarching definition of *avadāna* is the presence of very early Gāndhārī manuscripts in which stories that self-identify as *avadānas* do not contain any rebirth, never mind any attention to actions with results in later lifetimes. See Lenz 2010.

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